



An Interview with Don DeLillo

Thomas LeClair; Don DeLillo

Contemporary Literature, Vol. 23, No. 1. (Winter, 1982), pp. 19-31.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-7484%28198224%2923%3A1%3C19%3AAIWDD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G>

Contemporary Literature is currently published by University of Wisconsin Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/uwisc.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DON DELILLO

Conducted by Thomas LeClair

Of American novelists who began publishing in the seventies, Don DeLillo is one of the most prolific and original. He is also one of the most elusive. While his novels are located in America's fascinations—entertainment, big-time sport, intrigue—they are written with a detachment that causes reviewers to praise him for very different, sometimes contradictory intentions. The books are elusive because, for DeLillo, fiction draws its power from and moves toward mystery. Elusive, too, because DeLillo has not joined the literary auxiliary: he does not sit on panels, appear on television, judge contests, review books, or teach creative writing. He travels and writes.

DeLillo agreed to do this interview from what he thought was the safe distance of Greece. When I managed to get to Athens in September of 1979, and not long after I met him, he handed me a business card engraved with his name and "I don't want to talk about it." He does not like to discuss his work, but he is a witty conversationalist, an informed and generous walking guide, invaluable in Greek taxis and restaurants. When we taped in his apartment in Athens, he spoke quietly and slowly, in a slight New York accent, searching for the precision he insists upon in his fiction. One soon understands from his uninflected tone, which sounds more like thought than talk, and from the silences between his short declarative sentences that Don DeLillo's elusiveness comes naturally, necessarily, from his concern with what he quotes Hermann Broch as calling "the word beyond speech."

DeLillo's books offer a precise and thorough anthropology of the present, an account of our kinship in myths, media, and conspiracies. His first novel, *Americana*, begins in the television industry and moves cross country searching for relief from the image. The

heroes of *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street* are football and rock stars trying to work their way out of their public mythologies. In *Players* and *Running Dog*, DeLillo writes about up-to-date conspiracies prompted by the appeal of terrorism and pornography. These novels about the grids of American power and the need for purity have the detail of fieldwork and the economy of understanding.

DeLillo likes to work in popular forms, occasionally turning them against readers' expectations. In *Ratner's Star*, the book he considers his best, he combines elements of children's literature, science fiction, and mathematics to create a conceptual monster, a totalizing work like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or Barth's *Letters*. Like DeLillo's more realistic fiction, *Ratner's Star* uses its bulk and abstraction to imply all that cannot be spoken in characters, words, and numbers.

Q. Why do reference books give only your date of birth and the publication dates of your books?

A. Silence, exile, cunning, and so on. It's my nature to keep quiet about most things. Even the ideas in my work. When you try to unravel something you've written, you belittle it in a way. It was created as a mystery, in part. Here is a new map of the world, it is seven shades of blue. If you're able to be straightforward and penetrating about this invention of yours, it's almost as though you're saying it wasn't altogether necessary. The sources weren't deep enough. Maybe this view is overrefined and too personal. But I think it helps explain why some writers are unable or unwilling to discuss their work. There's an element of tampering. And there's a crossover that can be difficult to make. What you write, what you say about it. The vocabularies don't match. It's hard to correspond to reality, to talk sensibly about an idea or a theme that originates in a writer's desire to restructure reality.

But here I am, talking.

Q. Of your six novels, which one is closest to your own experience?

A. *Americana*, probably, in the sense that I drew material more directly from people and situations I knew firsthand. I was hurling things at the page. At the time I lived in a small apartment with no stove and the refrigerator in the bathroom and I thought first novels written under these circumstances ought to be novels in which great

chunks of experience are hurled at the page. So that's what I did. The original manuscript was higher than my radio.

It's not an autobiographical novel. But I did use many things I'd seen, heard, knew about.

Q. Your work seems to me quite different in tone and in language from most contemporary fiction. I wondered if you felt that you were on to something different.

A. When I was about halfway through *Americana*, which took roughly four years to do, it occurred to me almost in a flash that I was a writer. Whatever tentativeness I'd felt about the book dropped away. I finished it in a spirit of getting a difficult, unwieldy thing out of the way, in a spirit of having proved certain things to myself. With *End Zone* I felt I was doing something easier and looser. I was working closer to my instincts. I paced things differently. Balances became important, starts and stops. I approached certain things from unusual angles, I think. Some of the characters have a made-up nature. They are pieces of jargon. They engage in wars of jargon with each other. There is a mechanical element, a kind of fragmented self-consciousness. I took this further in *Ratner's Star*, where characters don't just open their mouths to say hello. They have to make the action part of the remark: "My mouth says hello." "My ears hear." The characters are words on paper. This isn't necessarily true of the other books. *End Zone* and *Ratner's Star* are books of games, books in which fiction itself is a sort of game.

My work also grew more precise. I began to study things more, disassemble them. Possibly what I was studying was ways to use the language. It may be the case that with *End Zone* I began to suspect that language was a subject as well as an instrument in my work, although I'd find it hard to say in what ways exactly.

Q. Games are important in your fiction. Were they an early interest?

A. The games I've written about have more to do with rules and boundaries than with the free-wheeling street games I played when I was growing up. People whose lives are not clearly shaped or marked off may feel a deep need for rules of some kind. People leading lives of almost total freedom and possibility may secretly crave rules and boundaries, some kind of control in their lives. Most games are carefully structured. They satisfy a sense of order and they even have an element of dignity about them. In *Ratner's Star* someone says, "Strict

rules add dignity to a game.” There are many games in *Ratner’s Star* and the book is full of adults acting like children, which is another reason why people play games, of course.

In *Running Dog*, Selvy is playing a game when he leads his pursuers in a straight line to southwest Texas, where he knows they’ll try to kill him. In *End Zone*, one of the games is football. There are others. Games provide a frame in which we can try to be perfect. Within sixty-minute limits or one-hundred-yard limits or the limits of a game board, we can look for perfect moments or perfect structures. In my fiction I think this search sometimes turns out to be a cruel delusion.

In *Players*, the rules become almost metaphysical. They involve inner restrictions. There’s some of that in *Running Dog* as well. Empty landscapes seem to inspire games.

Q. Your third novel, *Great Jones Street*, is set in the empty landscape of its title. How did you happen to write about a rock star?

A. It’s a game at the far edge. It’s an extreme situation. I think rock is a music of loneliness and isolation. The Doors work very well at the beginning of the film *Apocalypse Now*. A man with a half shattered mind, alone in a rented room. Noise, electricity, excess, Vietnam, all these things are tied together in *Great Jones Street*, and a certain tension is drawn out of the hero’s silence, his withdrawal. Bucky Wunderlick’s music moves from political involvement to extreme self-awareness to childlike babbling.

Q. Perhaps because of the game element, reviewers of your fiction have a hard time locating your attitudes toward your characters.

A. My attitudes aren’t directed toward characters at all. I don’t feel sympathetic toward some characters, unsympathetic toward others. I don’t love some characters, feel contempt for others. They have attitudes, I don’t.

Some people may have felt I disliked Pammy and Lyle in *Players*. Not true. I think these two characters are more typical of contemporary Americans than people want to believe. Lyle is an intelligent, high-strung, spiritually undernourished person. Pammy is more humane. She is also more prone to be affected by the shallow ideas drifting through her world, and she is constantly afraid. I can talk about them this way but I can’t talk about them as people I love or hate. They’re people I recognize.

What writing means to me is trying to make interesting, clear, beautiful language. Working at sentences and rhythms is probably the most satisfying thing I do as a writer. I think after a while a writer can begin to know himself through his language. He sees someone or something reflected back at him from these constructions. Over the years it's possible for a writer to shape himself as a human being through the language he uses. I think written language, fiction, goes that deep. He not only sees himself but begins to make himself or remake himself. Of course this is mysterious and subjective territory.

Writing also means trying to advance the art. Fiction hasn't quite been filled in or done in or worked out. We make our small leaps. This is the reason for the introduction to *Players*. All the main characters, seven of them, are introduced in an abstract way. They don't have names. Their connections to each other are not clear in all cases. They're on an airplane, watching a movie, but all the other seats are empty. They're isolated, above the story, waiting to be named. It's a kind of model-building. It's the novel in miniature. We can call it pure fiction in the sense that the characters have been momentarily separated from the storytelling apparatus. They're still ideas, vague shapes.

Q. What do you think of the renewed interest in "moral fiction"?

A. Anthony Burgess wrote that the term evil has no meaning in *Running Dog*.

Q. Another reviewer complained that the book was reductive.

A. Moll Robbins is the weather vane for all the avarice in the book, the maneuverings for power. Her own imperfections may frustrate the reader who is looking for a moral center. The evil, or whatever we call it, is there. We can't position these acts and attitudes around a nineteenth-century heroine. They float in a particular social and cultural medium. A modern American medium. Half-heartedness and indifference are very much to the point. People tend to walk away from their own conspiracies. Hitler is a fatigued and defeated man dressed up like Charlie Chaplin.

I'd say the style and language of *Running Dog* reflect the landscape more than they reflect the writer's state of mind. The bareness is really the bareness and starkness of lower Manhattan and southwest Texas. And since the book is essentially a thriller, I felt the prose should be pared down. But the reductiveness belongs to character

and setting, not to the author's view of things. The author was amused, by and large. The author thought most of the characters were damned funny.

Glen Selvy, who was not one of the funny ones, believes that choice is a subtle form of disease. He feels he has to commit what is in effect a ritual suicide. He is leaving behind whatever is difficult about life, whatever is complicated. I try to understand what makes Selvy go. I don't patronize him or feel contempt for him because he leads a life that is simplified to an extreme degree. Selvy feels that knowing his weapons, how to take them apart and put them back together, is a form of self-respect. He finds his truth in violence. He is an adept of violence, a semi-mystic.

Q. Is this the case with many of your main characters? They withdraw, reduce their relations, empty out, discipline themselves.

A. I think they see freedom and possibility as being too remote from what they perceive existence to mean. They feel instinctively there's a certain struggle, a solitude they have to confront. The landscape is silent, whether it's a desert, a small room, a hole in the ground. The voice you have to answer is your own voice. In *End Zone*, Gary Harkness stops eating and drinking in the last paragraph. He goes on a hunger strike. He isn't protesting anything or reacting to anything specific. He is paring things down. He is struggling, trying to face something he felt had to be faced. Something nameless. I thought this was interesting. I couldn't give a name to it. He just stops eating. He refuses to eat.

Q. In *End Zone* you have a character taking a college course in "the untellable." That's not entirely facetious, is it?

A. I do wonder if there is something we haven't come across. Is there another, clearer language? Will we speak it and hear it when we die? Did we know it before we were born? If there are life forms on other galaxies, how do they communicate? What do they sound like?

The "untellable" points to the limitations of language. Is there something we haven't discovered about speech? Is there more? Maybe this is why there's so much babbling in my books. Babbling can be frustrated speech or it can be a purer form, an alternate speech. I wrote a short story that ends with two babies babbling at each other in a car. This was something I'd seen and heard, and it was a dazzling and unforgettable scene. I felt these babies *knew* something. They were talking, they were listening, they were *commenting*,

and above and beyond it all they were taking an immense pleasure in the exchange.

Glossolalia is interesting because it suggests there's another way to speak, there's a very different language lurking somewhere in the brain.

Q. Are you interested in specialized languages?

A. Specialized languages can be very beautiful. Mysterious and precise at the same time. In *Ratner's Star* there's a dictionary definition of the word cosine that illustrates this, I think. Mathematics and astronomy are full of beautiful nomenclature. Science in general has given us a new language to draw from. Some writers shrink from this. Science is guilty, the language of science is tainted by horror and destruction. To me, science is a source of new names, new connections between people and the world. Rilke said we had to rename the world. Renaming suggests an innocence and a rebirth. Some words adapt, and these are the ones we use in our new world.

Then there is jargon, which I associate with television for some reason. The one was invented to deliver the other. But I'm interested in the way people talk, jargon or not. The original idea for *Players* was based on what could be called the intimacy of language. What people who live together really sound like. Pammy and Lyle were to address each other in the private language they'd constructed over years of living together. Unfinished sentences, childlike babbling, animal noises, foreign accents, ethnic dialects, mimicry, all of that. It's as though language is something we wear. The more we know someone, the easier it is to undress, to become childlike. But the idea got sidetracked and only fragments survive in the finished book.

Q. Would you name some writers with whom you have affinities?

A. This is the great bar-mitzvah question. Probably the movies of Jean-Luc Godard had a more immediate effect on my early work than anything I'd ever read. Movies in general may be the not-so-hidden influence on a lot of modern writing, although the attraction has waned, I think. The strong image, the short ambiguous scene, the dream sense of some movies, the artificiality, the arbitrary choices of some directors, the cutting and editing. The power of images. This is something I kept thinking about when I was writing *Americana*. This power had another effect. It caused people to walk around all day saying, "Movies can do *so much*." It's movies in part that seduced people into thinking the novel was dead. The power of the film image

seemed to be overwhelming our little world of print. Film could do so much. Print could only trot across the page. But movies and novels are too closely related to work according to shifting proportions. If the novel dies, movies will die with it.

The books I remember and come back to seem to be ones that demonstrate the possibilities of fiction. *Pale Fire*, *Ulysses*, *The Death of Virgil*, *Under the Volcano*, *The Sound and the Fury*—these come to mind. There's a drive and a daring that go beyond technical invention. I think it's right to call it a life-drive even though these books deal at times very directly with death. No optimism, no pessimism. No homesickness for lost values or for the way fiction used to be written. These books open out onto some larger mystery. I don't know what to call it. Maybe Hermann Broch would call it "the word beyond speech."

Q. There's an allusion to Wittgenstein in *End Zone*. Do you find something important in his work?

A. I've read parts of the *Tractatus*, but I have no formal training in mathematical logic and I couldn't say a thing about the technical aspects of the book. I like the way he uses the language. Even in translation, it's very evocative. It's like reading Martian. The language is mysteriously simple and self-assured. It suggests without the slightest arrogance that there's no alternative to these remarks. The statements are machine-tooled. Wittgenstein is the language of outer space, a very precise race of people.

Q. There are references to Zen in most of your books. Would you consider it an influence on your work?

A. I may have used the word several times, but I think only in *Americana* is there any kind of extended reference and it has more to do with people playing at Eastern religion than anything else. I know very little about Zen. I'm interested in religion as a discipline and a spectacle, as something that drives people to extreme behavior. Noble, violent, depressing, beautiful. Being raised as a Catholic was interesting because the ritual had elements of art to it and it prompted feelings that art sometimes draws out of us. I think I reacted to it the way I react today to theater. Sometimes it was awesome, sometimes it was funny. High funeral masses were a little of both and they're among my warmest childhood memories.

Q. Are you interested in mathematics for the same reason?

A. I started reading mathematics because I wanted a fresh view of the world. I wanted to immerse myself in something as remote as possible from my own interests and my own work. I became fascinated and ended up writing a novel and then a play about mathematicians. Aside from everything else, pure mathematics is a kind of secret knowledge. It's carried on almost totally outside the main currents of thought. It's a language almost no one speaks. In *Ratner's Star*, I tried to weave this secret life of mankind into the action of the book in the form of a history of mathematics, a cult history, the names of the leaders kept secret until the second half of the book, the mirror image, when the names appear in reverse order. This purest of sciences brings out a religious feeling in people. Numbers in particular have always had a mystical appeal. Numbers work in such surprising ways it's hard not to feel a sense of mystery and wonder.

Q. Do you consider *Ratner's Star* to be your best book?

A. We're supposed to say the one I'm doing now is my best book. Otherwise, *Ratner's Star*, yes.

Q. What were some of the influences on and intentions of *Ratner's Star*?

A. There's a structural model, the Alice books of Lewis Carroll. The headings of the two parts—Adventures and Reflections—refer to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. The connection, as I say, is structural. It involves format, not characters or themes or story except in the loosest sense. It works from the particular to the general. What is real in *Alice* becomes an abstraction in *Ratner's Star*. The rabbit hole of chapter one, for instance, becomes "substratum"—early or underground mathematics. There is also a kind of guiding spirit. This is Pythagoras, the mathematician-mystic. The whole book is informed by this link or opposition, however you see it, and the characters keep bouncing between science and superstition.

I was trying to produce a book that would be naked structure. The structure would be the book and vice versa. I wanted the book to become what it was about. Abstract structures and connective patterns. A piece of mathematics in short. To do this, I felt I had to reduce the importance of people. The people had to play a role subservient to pattern, form, and so on. This is difficult, of course, for all concerned, but I believed I was doing something new and was willing to take the risk. A book that is really all outline. My notes for the

book interest me almost as much as the book does. This is an incriminating remark, but there you are.

I hadn't started out to do this. All I had in mind was a fourteen-year-old mathematical genius who is asked to decipher a message from outer space. Things started happening to this simple idea. Connections led to other connections. I began to find things I didn't know I was looking for. Mathematics led to science fiction. Logic led to babbling. Language led to games. Games led to mathematics. When I discovered uncanny links to Alice and *her* world, I decided I had to follow. Down the rabbit hole.

A friend of mine said it was like reading the first half of one book and the second half of a completely different book. It's true in a way. There's a strong demarcation between the parts. They are opposites. Adventures, reflections. Positive, negative. Discrete, continuous. Day, night. Left brain, right brain. But they also link together. The second part bends back to the first. Somebody ought to make a list of books that seem to bend back on themselves. I think Malcolm Lowry saw *Under the Volcano* as a wheel-like structure. And in *Finnegans Wake* we're meant to go from the last page back to the first. In different ways I've done this myself. *Great Jones Street* bends back on itself in the sense that the book is the narrator's way of resurfacing. *Players* begins in darkness with an unidentified voice talking about motels. This is Lyle's voice, and the book ends with Lyle in a motel room in Canada, in blinding light. In *Ratner's Star*, Softly, who is a sort of white rabbit figure, leads Billy into the hole that will take him back to the beginning of the book. In chapter one Billy has a bandage on his finger—the finger he cut near the end of the book.

Q. In *Ratner's Star*, in a much-quoted passage, you refer to a class of writers who write "crazed prose" and books that are not meant to be read. Is *Ratner's Star* in that category?

A. No, it isn't, although I think I felt some of the pull of crazed prose. There's an element of contempt for meanings. You want to write outside the usual framework. You want to dare readers to make a commitment you know they can't make. That's part of it. There's also the sense of drowning in information and in the mass awareness of things. Everybody seems to know everything. Subjects surface and are totally exhausted in a matter of days or weeks, totally played out by the publishing industry and the broadcast industry. Nothing is too arcane to escape the treatment, the process. Making things difficult

for the reader is less an attack on the reader than it is on the age and its facile knowledge-market. The writer is driven by his conviction that some truths aren't arrived at so easily, that life is still full of mystery, that it might be better for you, dear reader, if you went back to the living section of your newspaper because this is the dying section and you don't really want to be here. This writer is working against the age and so he feels some satisfaction at not being widely read. He is diminished by an audience.

Q. Do you think about your readers?

A. I don't have a sense of a so-called ideal reader and certainly not of a readership, that terrific entity. I write for the page. My mail tells me nothing useful about what might be out there in the way of readers. It comes in dribblets, much of it from crazy people.

Q. Do you think they feel they have a sympathetic correspondent? There are crazy people in the backgrounds of your books.

A. Yes, they've crept in. The streets are full of disturbed people. For a long time I wondered where they were coming from, so many, at once. We now learn they've been let out of asylums and hospitals and into halfway houses and welfare hotels. I've always thought New York was a medieval city and this is another sign of that. They speak a kind of broken language. It's part of the language of cities, really. In *Players* these people are always talking to Pammy. They talk to Diana in "The Engineer of Moonlight." In the subway arcades under Fourteenth Street you hear mostly Spanish and black English with bits of Yiddish, German, Italian, and Chinese, and then there's this strange, broken language. The language of the insane is stronger than all the others. It's the language of the self, the pain of self.

Q. Is obsession necessary to create fiction that's better than pedestrian?

A. Obsession is interesting to writers because it involves a centering and a narrowing down, an intense convergence. An obsessed person is an automatic piece of fiction. He has a purity of movement, an integrity. There is a kind of sheen about him. To a writer, an obsessed person is *right there*. He is already on the page.

When it comes to writers being obsessed, I have one notion. Obsession as a state seems so close to the natural condition of a novelist at work on a book that there may be nothing else to say about it. It's not possible to say whether an obsession can drive some-

one to do better work. He's probably not obsessed. If he is obsessed, it's probably beside the point.

Q. How do you prepare to write?

A. By doing nothing. Keeping life simple. Giving ideas time to sort themselves out. I try to be patient. Time usually does the selecting for me. What I'm left with at the end of a given period is usually what I need to begin.

Q. What about the actual mechanics?

A. In the beginning I work brief shifts. The important mechanics are mental. A lot of mental testing goes on. Promising threads develop out of certain ideas or characters and some of these lines reach almost to the end of the book, or out into infinity, since the book doesn't have anything resembling an end at this point. Other lines are very short. Again, most of this is mental. It's stored. Some things I'll take right to the machine. Writing is intense concentration and the typewriter can act as a focusing tool or memory tool. It enables me to bore in on something more strongly. It also enables me to see the words being formed. What the words look like is important. How they look in combination. I have to see the words.

Past the early stages I work longer periods. I find myself nearing the end of certain early lines of thought. This represents progress. It reminds me that the work doesn't actually go out into infinity. These identical, shapeless, satisfying days will come to an end somewhere down the line.

Q. There's some very abstract spatial analysis of characters or situations in your fiction. Would you comment on its function?

A. It's a way to take psychology out of a character's mind and into the room he occupies. I try to examine psychological states by looking at people in rooms, objects in rooms. It's a way of saying we can know something important about a character by the way he sees himself in relation to objects. People in rooms have always seemed important to me. I don't know why or ask myself why, but sometimes I feel I'm *painting* a character in a room and the most important thing I can do is set him up in relation to objects, shadows, angles.

Q. Does place have any effect on your composition?

A. Sometimes things insinuate themselves onto the page. When I was working on *Great Jones Street*, there was dynamiting going on

all the time, and eventually these construction noises turned up in the book. But place has more important meanings. So much modern fiction is located precisely nowhere. This is Beckett and Kafka insinuating themselves onto the page. Their work is so woven into the material of modern life that it's not surprising so many writers choose to live there, or choose to have their characters live there. Fiction without a sense of real place is automatically a fiction of estrangement, and of course this is the point. As theory it has its attractions, but I can't write that way myself. I'm too interested in what real places look like and what names they have. Place is color and texture. It's tied up with memory and roots and pigments and rough surfaces and language, too. I'm interested in what mathematicians say. No matter how pure their work is, it has to be responsive to the real world, one way or another, in order to keep its vitality and to cleanse itself of effeteness and self-absorption.

Q. Would you comment on your play "The Engineer of Moonlight"? It seems to be a distillation of many of the ideas and voices in your fiction.

A. We talked earlier about people in rooms. The play is just that. People talking, people silent, people motionless, people juxtaposed with objects. There are four characters. What connects them is the awesome power of their loving. The main character is Eric Lighter, a once-great mathematician who is now a pathetic but compelling ruin. If the play has a line of development at all, it hinges on whether Eric's former wife will abandon a recent marriage and successful career to help the others transcribe and type Eric's half-insane memoirs, along with other day-to-day chores and obligations. The idea is absurd on the face of it. Diana ridicules the notion. Toward the end of the play she leaves the stage still denying that she'll stay. But we know she still feels a powerful love for Eric, for the aura of greatness that clings to him, and we feel uncertain about taking her at her word. The suggestion that she may stay is contained in a strange board game she'd played with the others earlier in act two. A game involving words and logic used in unfamiliar ways. If we take this game as a play within a play, what we see is that Diana, who has never played before, gradually comes to understand the strange and complex nature of the game—an understanding the audience doesn't share. Toward the end she is elated, she is saying it all begins to fit, the colors, the shapes, the names. She wants to play.